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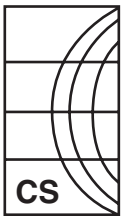

The Sex Worker and Her Pleasure

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abstract: The stereotypical view of prostitution is based on the idea that sex work destroys the woman's capability for sexual pleasure and alienates her from her sexuality. The author argues that that the idea of the destructive capacity of sex work is not universally obvious. Sex workers interviewed seem to derive sexual pleasure in both commercial and private relationships. Professional sex work can be perceived as a distancing from the prostitute's own enjoyment but it can also be a channel to a more emancipated and pleasurable sex life.

keywords: emotional work ✦ prostitution ✦ sex work ✦ sexual pleasure

Introduction

> The main difference is that in the context of sex for fun you usually are having sex with someone you really desire; in the context of sex as work you may desire the client but most times you don't, especially if your sexual orientation isn't white middle-aged heterosexual guys. If it is and you are working as a whore, then there can be a lot of pleasure in the work. (Valerie Scott, interviewed by Bell, 1994: 110)

One common belief is that the difference between commercial and private sex (ranging from long relationships to one-night stands) is that a commercial transaction will alienate a woman from her sexuality or even from her whole identity. Sexual body parts and acts became commodities (Pateman, 1988: 207). Some texts argue that prostitution also destroys the ability of a woman to enjoy sex in her private relations. The prostitute is seen when acting in a paid sexual relationship to be harming herself and therefore losing – at least temporarily – her ability to experience 'real' intimacy and sexuality (Farley et al., 2003: 34, 58).

Of course, many researchers do not agree with this argument. Authors writing about topics related to sex work have stressed the ambivalence of

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commercial sex, showing that the individual experience can be either abusive or empowering, or both (Kempadoo, 1998: 124–8). Still, there are only a few texts about sexual pleasure in sex work and those mostly concentrate on comparing sex workers as a united group with 'normal' women, neglecting the fact that in the field of commercial sex, individuals have different experiences, feelings and situations.

In this article, I examine what kinds of links exist between sex work and pleasure experienced by a sex worker. The term 'sex work' can mean a wide range of sex services, e.g. prostitution, stripping, table-dancing, porn acting or phone sex services. My interviewees are prostitutes, but I also call them sex workers, since the term is often used to emphasize the agency of workers (Sharp and Earle, 2003: 40). Even if the political sex workers' rights movement has concentrated on talking about work (Nengeh, 2006; *Sex Workers in Europe*, 2005), it should also be noted that some prostitutes have chosen sex work because of their sexual orientation, and that prostitutes face quite similar discrimination to that experienced by sexual minorities (Bell, 1994: 103–5). I analyse my material from both points of view. I am looking for an answer to how pleasure relates to sex as work and if there is something typical of commercial sex that increases or decreases a person's ability to derive sexual enjoyment.

Commercial Sex in Finland

My material was collected in Finland, where the high level of social security benefits puts prostitutes into a relatively strong position. Because every citizen is guaranteed a certain economic standard of living, forced prostitution is rare. Most the prostitutes work as independent call girls – considered in many countries as elite sex workers (O'Connell Davidson, 1998: 88). Thanks to the free education system, there are other options available to sex workers, and they usually stay in business for fewer than five years.

However, there are also whole groups of sex workers in Finland who do not have absolute control over their work. The field of prostitution is divided ethnically: the Finns offer traditional sex services (incalls/outcalls) and special services; the Thais offer erotic massage; the Russians and Estonians visiting Finland usually offer only traditional sex services. Because Russian sex workers usually do not speak Finnish, they are not capable of answering the telephone and thereby screening their customers. Furthermore, when they have to work under the threat of deportation and cannot trust the protection of the police, they have a much higher probability of facing violence and getting robbed than their Finnish or Estonian colleagues (Kontula, 2005).

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As the new communication technologies are becoming more and more common and changes are being made in the legislation (e.g. criminalizing soliciting, making foreign prostitutes liable to deportation), the internet is gradually replacing the streets, restaurants and newspapers as a way of finding customers. Those involved in Finnish prostitution use the internet in a variety of ways. Apart from the advertising of services, both customers and sex workers have discussion channels, together and separately. Prostitutes have a common 'blacklist' of unwanted clients' telephone numbers. There are also some customers and sex workers who write a web diary about commercial acts they have experienced.[1]

Currently, there are some 8000 prostitutes working in Finland each year, half of them Finns and the majority working part-time. Between a quarter and a third of them work with or under the control of a pimp.[2] A proportion of prostitution is associated with serious social problems such as crime, poverty, social marginalization and drug abuse. Those all exist in Finland but not on a large scale. The initiation of substitution treatment has cut down the proportion of injecting drug users in prostitution. Safe sex is common in commercial relationships (Kontula, 2005).

Material

The article is based on three years' fieldwork in the world of the Finnish sex business. My main material consists of the messages on the sex workers' closed internet discussion channel (11,000 posts from 2003 to 2006) and interviews with 25 sex workers (20 women, two men and three transgender).

I became interested in sex work after noticing the gap between common myths and the stories of some female prostitutes I met. The sexuality of sex workers seems to be the most sensitive and contested topic – about which no one asks sex workers' view. The emancipatory method used in international sex work research[3] was useful for this fieldwork. It is based on the idea that the interviewees can participate by formulating research questions and analysing the results.

As I am the vice president of SALLI (the United Sex Professionals of Finland[4]), stepping into the world of commercial sex was relatively easy for me. I already knew relevant key persons among sex workers, police, social workers and the academic world. Despite all these advantages, it took me two years to find 25 sex workers willing to commit to a research project that entailed being involved in several interviews and later making comments on the resulting texts.[5] Some of the interviewees simply contacted me but most of them were found through the network. Usually the decision to participate depended on recommendations from other sex workers.

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Interviewees were between the ages of 16 and 65 and worked mainly as call girls but also as street prostitutes, phone sex workers, strippers and S/M fantasy facilitators. Four of them have a sex work educational qualification, i.e. massage, bondage, nursing or therapeutic skills. Most of the interviewees were Finns, but my research also included interviews with one Russian, one Estonian and one Thai woman. Seven of the interviewees had dependent children while the children of four of the respondents were already independent. Eight of the sex workers were living in the same household as their partner and four others had a long-standing, loving and meaningful relationship. Some of these sex workers are full-time professionals while others only do it occasionally and fund themselves mainly in other ways (by other jobs or social benefits). Three had left prostitution and four planned to do so in the near future.

Because of the double life that sex workers live, researchers have found it difficult to enter into the private life of sex workers (Sanders, 2006: 455–6), while observation and interviews in a brothel or on the street is easier (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996: 8–10; Sanders, 2006: 456). In my study, the situation was quite different: commercial sex in Finland takes place mainly in private apartments or hotel rooms, not in public, so I was not able to observe the actual work situation. Most of the interviews were carried out at the sex workers' homes. I got to know their husbands, their pets and sometimes even their children. At first, I asked the interviewees to tell me their life story. In the second phase, I asked about themes common to most of the interviews: their sex life, the stigma and the management of their work and their lives. All formal interviews were taped but there was also a lot of informative but informal chatting.

A few of the sex workers interviewed made it quite clear that for them I was not just a researcher but also an ally. They might have chosen to talk to me because in the media I was presented as 'the defender of whores' (Veera). The sex workers told me explicitly that for them the reason to participate in my study was their interest in relating their experiences, which were different from the common myths.

Because of my reputation I also attained access to the sex workers' discussion channel. 'Sex Worker Community'[6] has about 60 members – mostly Finnish call girls although other sex workers and nationalities are also represented. Except for the webmaster, I am the only non-professional accessing the channel. For a researcher this kind of internet channel can be a precious resource, because there the sex workers choose and evaluate topics without any pressure on the part of the researcher. They know that I read and have used the material, but I joined as recently as 2006 and most of the messages had been posted before that.

Prostitution is a highly marginalized, stigmatized and invisible phenomenon in Finland. Street soliciting is illegal, foreigners are not allowed

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to work at all and even offering sex services in private spaces is strictly regulated. Most of the part-time sex workers do not know anybody else in the business. This context underlines the importance of the possibility of chatting anonymously on the internet. They exchange professional tips, warn each other about difficult customers, liaise on various issues and just talk about the good and the bad sides of their work. Occasionally, some members of this online community arrange meetings. For example, when one of the sex workers was raped, some of the others went to the trial to support and encourage her.

For this article, I selected from my material all the passages that include sex workers' views about their sexual enjoyment – or lack of it. I found out that they differentiate between commercial and private sex in at least two ways. First, to manage in sex work requires occasional distancing that decreases pleasure. On the other hand, sex work may emancipate sex workers by giving them more control over the sex act.

Sexual Pleasure: Myth and Fact

Before reflecting on the special character of commercial sex, it is necessary to note the two myths associated with the claim that prostitution is universally of an abusive nature. First, there is the belief that private sex should be pleasurable (for a woman) while commercial sex is not. Quoting Carole Pateman (1988: 198): 'prostitution is the use of a woman's body by a man for his own satisfaction. There is no desire or satisfaction on the part of the prostitute.' Second, it is assumed that satisfying sex is not possible (for a woman) without emotional affection (Barry, 1984: 266–9; Dworkin, 1987).

The empirical material questions these myths. Even if sexual desire is not self-evident, either in private or commercial relationships, still most of the interviewees say that pleasure and orgasms are one part of their work. Sexual pleasure is not the main point but it is still there. Very rarely do you meet a prostitute who is seriously addicted to sex or one who finds sex repellent.

Of course, sex workers probably have as much heterogeneity in relation to their sexual pleasure as people in general. Some limit it clearly to the area of private relationships while others only to commercial sex. Maija feels that she is responsible for the satisfaction of her customers but in her private sex she lets men satisfy her, she is 'totally selfish'. Sirkka considers that sex could be more enjoyable in a commercial context because when the man has to pay for the sex he values it more highly.

In Mari-Elina Laukkanen's (1998) study of male prostitutes, she noted that while some of the men worked for money, some of them were mainly motivated by their own sexual pleasure. 'That's why the hustler is not

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only the object of consuming customers; he is also the consuming subject as well. Paying customers ensure him a varying and never ending playground of sexual fantasies' (Laukkanen, 1998: 61). Similar motives to sex work were found in interviews with Swedish homosexual male prostitutes (Eriksson and Knutagård, 2005: 35–6).

In my material, sexual pleasure and making money commonly exist side by side in the same interview, as in Laukkanen's study. Even Taru, who stresses how prostitution is only a matter of income for her, relates that there was a time when pleasure was a very important motivation to work. A few years later she faced many disappointments in her private life and decided to satisfy her desires exclusively by using customers:

> Then I decided to start using [men] just for sexual satisfaction. If I do it anyway and get money from it, then I can also take my pleasure from it. And I succeeded in it so well that I really began to see men only as a walking piece of meat or something. That they can give to woman nothing else but sex. (Taru)

It is also quite common that the pleasure found in sex work can vary quite a lot for an individual: Kaarina says that her own enjoyment is dependent on how she relates to the customer. Lilja told me that when she was using amphetamines, she was 'awfully hooked on sex' with clients. Tiuku started as a sex worker by taking customers only when she missed sex. Later she kept a professional distance from her own pleasure in commercial relationships:

> It isn't a pure business relationship. It was very clear from the first, that clients were there for me and my desires. I mean, I satisfied my desires with clients. (Tiuku)

There is a wide range of experiences. In light of my material, getting an orgasm is just one of many ways to find enjoyment. Sexual pleasure can mean all those sensations, reactions and acts that people conceive as sexual and that produce pleasure at a physical, mental or spiritual level. Some sex workers link their own sexual pleasure with almost every act with clients; while for others pleasure is more like a memorable exception. Even if we remember that perhaps the most common rating for clients or acts would be 'indifferent', it is possible to see that there are no clear-cut distinctions between private and commercial sex in relation to prostitutes' sexual pleasure. It is true that sex workers make a distinction between work and private life but my data do not support the claim that the distinction is made by placing pleasure and emotions mostly in private relationships (but cf. Sanders [2002: 561], whose data do).

Contrary to some of the most common myths, women can also enjoy commercial sex and often without any emotional involvement. If it is not the sexual satisfaction, then what is the difference between private and commercial sex? My interpretation is that the more important distinction

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is the way sex workers value sexual pleasure. While it is not so important in commercial sex, successful private sex usually presupposes that it is enjoyable for both partners. In sex work, a different set of criteria needs to be applied. Even if a prostitute's sexual pleasure was a part of commercial sex, it is not the determining criterion. And even if prostitutes usually considered orgasm positively, it isn't self-evident that it constitutes an ideal act for a prostitute:

> They say that prostitution is easy money. So, once I had a trick who didn't come whatever I did. It took two and half hours of sucking before he came. Well, it wasn't so bad, I had three orgasms and got 300 euros, but still. You should suck a dick two and half hours and then come and tell me it is easy money. Thank God he was so small that my jaws didn't get tired out. (Minna)

This is the crucial difference when we compare commercial and private sex from the perspective of the sex worker. Even if these two acts look the same and both are called sex, for the sex worker they are two different practices: sex as work and sex as joy.

Professionalism Means Emotional Work

Sex work can offer sexual pleasure to the prostitute, but in many cases it does not. After those factors that decrease the pleasure in all kinds of sex acts are excluded, what factors typical to commercial sex can inhibit the sexual enjoyment of the seller?

First, a sex worker does not screen clients primarily on the basis of her own potential pleasure, as she might do in her private life. From the view of the professional sex worker, the client is good enough if he is clean, sober, pays what has been promised, acts respectfully, comes quickly and doesn't develop an infatuation. His sexual attractiveness is not nearly as important as these qualities.

It is also significant that when sex workers talk about professionalism, they rarely talk about sex. The technical skill is not seen as remarkable, as Lilja says, 'you will soon learn them, the various face to face positions, doggy fashion or whatever'. The source of sex workers' prowess is rather a question of what kind of atmosphere she can create. The good sex worker is polite and kind and makes the clients feel they are special even when she has had a bad day. Gerda indicates how this presupposes sensitivity and experience, especially with new customers. Because sexuality is so intimate an area, you have 'to notice all small nuances and figure out, what's the name of the game and what he likes' (Gerda).

At least from the point of view of Finnish prostitutes, using one's emotional skills is a characteristic of sex work. Professionalism in emotional work is the skill of creating for a client an emotional illusion by using phys-

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ical gestures and social knowledge to awaken the hoped for reaction in the client (Pasko, 2002: 55). The difference between a professional and an amateur is not in her appearance, in her age or even in her technical knowledge, but in what kind of emotions and experiences she can create for the client. An emotionally talented sex worker can and usually does derive an economic benefit from her skill. One sex worker put this concretely by saying that if you are able to get moist naturally or know how to add lubricant without the client noticing it, you can get 20 euros more from a client. In some cases, they can charge several times more for their services than their less professional colleagues. And it isn't limited just to the real or faked orgasms but also to the whole atmosphere of the meeting.

> Many of those men looking for sex services expect to get good and polite service. They want a service that makes them feel that they are the only ones, that there is time for them and there is no hurry. At that point I understood how very, very important those feelings are for the man who comes to enjoy sex. (Tiina)

According to my interviewees, the male customers consider the sex worker's (real or faked) orgasm very important for a successful act. Taru and Sirkka say that if it seems important to the client, they fake orgasm convincingly. 'Because it's human nature, that if he wants something and he's offered the evidence he's looking for, he will believe it easily' (Taru).

> I have never come with a client and I don't even try to. In a way it's easy but sometimes I'm annoyed by those who want 'forcibly' to give me pleasure. It's exhausting to fake coming time and time again, thinking what would be a suitable and believable interval for coming when useless and unskilled nerds make my clit ache. (Maisa)

Many of my interviewees stress the more general skill of creating just the right level of intimate atmosphere for each client. Even though there are stereotypical ideas of a highly sexed macho man who is always capable of intercourse, in the everyday work of prostitutes it is often important to overcome the anxieties of the customer. There are many kinds of methods:

> I might stroke his back or tummy to get that person relaxed. It won't take more than perhaps one minute . . . when overcoming his shyness using other techniques would have taken forever. And that would have made my work more difficult. (Gerda)

> My client, a man in his fifties, lies on my bed, apparently nervous, though trying to pretend to be relaxed. I give him a really good massage on his neck, shoulders and back for about 15 minutes before I ask him to turn around so that I can move to the erotic part of the massage. Whatever I try, nothing seems to happen in his penis. We listen to the nice and easy background music from the radio. After the last song the radio announcer says that it was performed

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> by 'Eternal Erection'. I repeat absent-mindedly 'eternal erection', when my client looks at me and says sadly: 'I wish I could get it up for five minutes'. (Kaarina)

The more strongly a prostitute feels responsible for the customer's experience, the more likely she is to give up her own pleasure even in those situations when the moment would be perfect for concentrating on her self. If the pleasure of the sex worker could threaten professional competence, it is usual to try to restrain it.

> I have always (for as long as I can remember) had fantastic orgasms that blow my mind. . . . With tricks I also try to be – to think something else so that I won't shout and freak out when I come. Anyway, sometimes it happens that I just do come and I can't help that. On occasions I have even ejaculated. . . . Then I wonder why on earth I'm sometimes totally knackered after two tricks. (Sofia)

Replacing personal pleasure by avoiding or faking orgasm is usually done to keep the client at a distance but this decision does not imply a loss of self. Such a distancing is not an alienation of these women's sexuality, but a means to control their professional life.

A distancing from one's own pleasure can be seen as indifference but many times it means just the opposite. Many professional sex workers think that because it is a question of a commercial transaction, they have a duty to take responsibility and put the customers' enjoyment first. If there are many customers in a day, it could also be a matter of commercial necessity:

> If there are only one or two clients, max, in a day, then I can let myself come. But if there are more, it just isn't possible. For example, if I have two or three orgasms with the first and second client, I wouldn't bother to take any more. (Minna)

So, the essential difference between commercial and private sex is the motivation and the whole definition of sex. Sex workers can feel sexual pleasure during a commercial act but only when it does not endanger the primary function of their work; that function is usually to get as high a price as possible with as little effort as possible by offering the client an erotic experience. The professionalism of sex work, as a Finnish peer-written guide for sex workers points out,[7] is controlling the situation, keeping a necessary distance and minimizing the worker's own effort.

Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003: 6–7) describes *emotional work* as the controlled expression of feelings that itself has a monetary value. She has studied flight attendants and noted distinctions between their physical (pushing heavy carts), mental (organizing emergency landings) and emotional work. The last 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of

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mind in others – in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place'.

Prostitution has also been described as emotional work (Agustin, 2003: 385–6; Chapkis, 1997: 69–83). Agustin compares sex workers with babysitters and carers of elderly people, when they consider pretending care as a part of their work: 'Those selling sex without themselves feeling sexual interest are presumably engaging in emotional labor simply by making the effort to appear excited.'

Hochschild (2003: 187–9) sees the effects of emotional work as problematic. According to her, using emotions in commercial transactions leads to an objectification of human affairs and eradicates the 'real' emotions. Doesn't this kind of critique come near to the idea of the alienating influence of prostitution, even if these critics do not want to connect sex with discussions about working life?

However, the situation of Finnish sex workers is very different from that of American flight attendants. Hochschild developed her theory in the context of a large organization, where workers' emotions were controlled and standardized by the management. Päivi Korvajärvi (1999: 354) points out that most studies on emotional work are more interested in the mechanisms of management, rather than paying attention to the experiences of the workers themselves or to small groups. As a result, the negative effects of emotional work have been overstated.

The emotional nature of sex work often requires a distancing of the prostitute's own sexual pleasure, but in some situations it simply means the sex workers' attempt to protect themselves from alienation. Both Agustin (2003) and Chapkis (1997) dismiss the significance of workers' autonomy in emotional work. But in Finland, the demand for sex services is large compared with the supply, so sex services are relatively expensive and prostitutes can choose their clients and working conditions. Even if there are emotional risks in sex work, some women calculate that the risks are lower than the emotional risks in other – more controlled – jobs that are available to them.

My interviewees recognize the emotional aspect, but they don't consider it exploitation. Rather they consider their social and emotional skills as a resource that helps to keep the commercial act under the prostitute's control. Hochschild (2003: 187) also emphasizes how the risks of emotional work can be reduced when workers are granted greater autonomy.

Being in Control

In many cases, working successfully in the sex industry requires a distancing from one's own sexual pleasure. Even so, my material shows that prostitution can also work as a means to more satisfying sex in private

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life. Female sex workers calculate that even when commercial sex does not offer memorable pleasure, it can lead to more equal and thereby also more pleasurable private relationships. How then is that possible?

To explain this phenomenon, I examine further the power relationship between prostitutes and clients. Sex workers seem to feel that the situation favours them: 13 out of the 25 sex workers interviewed stress that they are in the dominant position, while 11 believe that the power is divided equally between the parties, so that a prostitute defines limits to a client's choices.[8]

Sex workers' feelings of being in control are remarkable, not just because this contradicts the common myths but also because a lot of stories about being dominated, to one extent or another, in their *non-commercial* sex relationships emerged in my material. Tiuku feels that she was pressured into her first sexual relationship. Lilja's first love dropped her just after she had surrendered her virginity to him. Ramona's teenage love demanded one-sided oral sex three times a day. Kaarina describes the frustration of her marriage, which gave her no sexual pleasure:

> Perhaps I always wished that I would get something from the men I slept with. And I never got anything, I mean that I never expressed what I wanted. I just hoped that the man would understand some of it instinctively. (Kaarina)

There are also some real veterans of unhappy relationships in my study. Taru lost her virginity in a gang rape. After that she had two long relationships with unfaithful men and one violent marriage. Gerda has had two marriages, both of them filled with experiences of being subordinated, made to feel unclean and have forced sex:

> I said [to my husband] that 'every time I go to the supermarket' – I went only a couple of times a week or so, it's tough to go with children – so, 'every time I'm at the supermarket I buy a soap if I happen to remember how disgusting and dirty I feel when I have to perform marital duties with you. And if I don't have money to buy the soap when I want, I make a mental note and buy two next time.' I had kilos of the stuff. Believe me. (Gerda)

Even if not all of these experiences can be considered highly traumatic, they have relevance to those who tell their stories, especially in relation to their controlling position in sex work. The prostitutes who have bad memories of abuse in their private relationships can feel that in commercial sex they have power:

> Earlier I was somehow afraid, partly I was afraid and in a way kept a kind of respectful distance from men. Now it's definitely the other way round. That the men are the needy party and I can treat them however it suits me at that moment. So, if I don't want something I just don't want it and the man has to accept that. In relation to me they are in a subordinate position. I'm the one

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> who decides and regulates. Which . . . is also wrong. Still, on the other hand, we are equal. But I have to say anyway that many times I do feel superior. (Kaarina)

After being in a subordinate position in past non-commercial relationships, it is liberating to notice that there is nothing wrong in demanding one's own satisfaction. Some people sell sex just for their own pleasure; but even when sex work is not pleasurable, it may convince the sex worker that a woman can also be desirable in the superior position. This experience is then brought forward to private relationships:

> I have had this kind of . . . that I just exist to satisfy the needs of men. I haven't even felt that is a meaningful issue. But now I have begun to analyse this through this work and in relation to Jani [her boyfriend]. So that I can demand more. (Ramona)

> I made a man lick me twice today so I don't see anything wrong with it. It feels fucking good when an experienced tongue plays with your pussy *sluRps*. (Verna)

At least in the Finnish context, sex work may encourage sex workers to concentrate more on their own satisfaction. Why does someone who feels herself dominated in her private relationship find a more commanding role through sex work? There are two explicit reasons for this – the general situation in the Finnish sex trade and the internal power relations of the commercial transaction.

Currently, a characteristic of Finnish prostitution is that demand exceeds supply.[9] The relatively small number of sex workers and the availability of other jobs or social benefits mean the sex worker can pick and choose her customers. This seems to be one of the most important factors in the autonomy of a prostitute, since to some extent clients have to compete with each other for the attention of sex workers. The prostitute has more freedom to choose:

> And if I have no fun with a client, I'll know it by the second time and say straight to the client that it doesn't work. I just say straight that 'you should look for the service somewhere else because you can't get it from me'. I have had to say this tens of times but it's true. I have as much right to choose my clients as they have to choose me. (Tiina)

The internal power relations of the commercial transaction also strengthen the position of sex workers in relation to their clients: the client has to pay and he is the one who wants something. In many cases, for him the successful act also requires the enjoyment of the prostitute, as we have seen. On the other hand, a sex worker can be quite satisfied if she just gets her money. Usually, money changes hands beforehand, so the amount does not depend on the degree of the client's enjoyment. Even when the

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prostitute is not in the business voluntarily, the source of her income is not confined to one customer and she has some degree of choice.

This advantageous position that the sex worker enjoys at present could crumble in an instant, however, if either the buoyant situation of the Finnish sex trade or the dynamics of the commercial transaction should cease. Ramona tells me that when there are too many sex workers in her area offering erotic massage, she has to 'flatter' and indulge customers further. The case of Gerda is a good example of how traumatic non-voluntary prostitution can be. She decided to stop working on the street when she felt that the disrespectful attitude of customers threatened her mental health:

> I thought of finding for myself a kind of a special knife where the handle looks like the top of a cock. When the client sits in a car with his safety belt on I say to him: 'Yes, keep that safety belt on. I think it's fun. You don't have to get up. I fit there quite well between your tummy and the wheel, just move a little bit backwards.' And when the client almost lies down there, he isn't really watching. He just waits to get served. There I would take some clothes off and so on. Then I would stab him in the stomach with the knife and ride on the cock. It would move up and down in him – of course it wouldn't work because that man would still have hands. And then there would be absolute bedlam. But I think it was a beautiful idea. Somehow it matched with the world where those wankers with unwashed dicks dare to ask me for a blow job without a condom. It was so disgusting. And I don't believe they even realize how humiliating that kind of a request is. 'Take my filthy limp dick in your mouth.' – 'Suck your own dick!' I noticed how my aggressions rose. (Gerda)

The power relation between a prostitute and her customer is also connected to the individual skills and resources of the two parties. Minna entered sex work at the age of 16. She tells how she submitted to the requests of the clients even when they threatened her well-being, just because she was too young to deny them:

> One time – well, this isn't really a bad story but still it somehow left a scar. After the sex, the client wanted to take me to a parking lot and called some friends there. I had to get out of the car and turn around so that they could see me properly. Just like a cattle show. (Minna)

The sex workers' own experience of their work as a source of self-defined sexuality is confusing. There are some studies that describe prostitution as a channel to economic and social independence (Roberts, 1992: 326–32; Swantz, 1979: 111–14), but becoming sexually independent has rarely been associated with commercial sex. Still, it seems that at least in some cases the internal power relation of sex work can emancipate prostitutes towards more pleasurable and self-confident sexuality.

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Conclusion

In the light of my interviews with Finnish prostitutes, it is hard to see any kind of common link between commercial sex and sexual alienation. Sex workers simply seem to be capable of experiencing sexual pleasure, both in commercial and private relationships. Both situations can expose the sex worker to traumatic experiences.

In many cases, professional sex work requires a distancing from one's own sexual pleasure and emotions, but even so, my interviewees were capable of maintaining romantic private relationships in which they could derive sexual satisfaction. It is also possible to find many examples of how the experience of control in commercial acts has emancipated sex workers towards more independent sexuality.

It seems that in our efforts to examine the exploitative mechanism characteristic of sex work we should pay less attention to the sex act itself and concentrate on those circumstances in which it is performed. In the life of an individual prostitute, depending on different times and contexts, sex work can be either a supporting or a destructive factor of sexuality. Instead of arguing that commercial sex is inherently an abusive practice, we should consider under what kinds of conditions the sex work takes place.

Notes

1. See www.sihteeriopisto.net for examples of Finnish web diaries.
2. Because pimping is concentrated within Russian prostitution and the majority of the Russian prostitutes only stay in Finland for a few days at a time, the percentage of prostitutes connected to pimping varies.
3. See www.nswp.org/r4sw/
4. SALLI is a not-for-profit organization for sex workers in Finland. The aim of SALLI is to promote human rights, safety at work and professional skills for sex workers. See www.salli.org/english/index.html
5. Pyett (1998: 368) calls a similar method 'community driven research' – with the difference that in India (where Pyett's study took place) physical communities really exist, unlike in Finland.
6. See www.sihteeriopisto.net/forum/. There are a few articles about the role of the internet in the sex business (Sanders, 2005; Sharp and Earle, 2003) but the empirical material for these articles is collected from websites available to anyone.
7. *Turvallisempaa seksiä, turvallisempaa seksityötä* (1997: 48–55).
8. Interestingly, of the 25 prostitutes interviewed, only one, a male prostitute, said that he was sometimes in a less powerful position than his clients.
9. The scale of a sector in the grey economy is obviously difficult to estimate. However, what my interviewees reported was backed up by a test I did myself: I put an ad on some of the most popular dating websites. I got hundreds of answers in one week.

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